

Genesis 12: 1-3  
Luke 4: 16-21  
Creekside COB  
October 16, 2005

### Three Rules of Thumb

**What I am about to do I have not done before. I am not licensed or credentialed to do it, although I do know a therapist and a Disciples of Christ pastor who are accredited. You will need to trust me on this one. I promise that what I'm about to do isn't dangerous; at least I don't think it is, and if things turns out as I hope, it may do some good.**

**Are you ready? I want you to get comfortable in your pew and concentrate on relaxing. Feel the tension losing its grip on your muscles. Imagine you are light as a feather, flying on a breeze. Now, fix your gaze on this gold watch swinging by a chain. Watch the pendulum motion-- back and fourth, back and fourth. Your eyelids are getting heavy. You feel sleepy... very, very sleepy.**

**You are now in a hypnotic trance. You will be obedient to all my commands. I will now erase from your consciousness every negative thought about... evangelism. You will not remember *overly friendly people who were out to get you saved*. You will not remember religious tracts that, *"If you are run over by a steamroller on your way home from work tonight, do you know where you will spend eternity?"* You will not remember people who twisted your arm or tried to wear you down through arguments or those who saturated you with Bible passages so you would "give up" and become a Christian. Let go the memory of church services where you had to keep singing, "Just As I Am" until someone finally came forward to the altar. You will have no recollection of intrusive people at your front door, pushing literature in your face, and telling you that God's grace is only for those who believe exactly as they believe.**

**You will not associate evangelism with pressure tactics, arguments, sales pitches, or TV evangelists wearing hundred dollar haircuts and designer suits. You will not get knots in your stomach when the pastor says we've got to get serious about practice sharing our faith. All these thoughts are gone. You will have no memory of this hypnosis, and will come out of it at the count of three. One, two, three.**

**Yes, I'm being outrageous, but if I could clean the slate of your minds, and write a new, positive script of Christian evangelism on them, I would. Evangelism is the dirtiest work in the Christian lexicon, but its time to release it from the negative baggage that is stuck to it, and adopt a gracious, generous, inviting and loving style of evangelism that just so happens to be the style in which Jesus shared the good news.**

**Over the next four Sundays I will offer messages that I hope will not only change our understanding of evangelism, but engage us in practicing it in concrete ways so that making new disciples and growing the congregation will become an expectation and not an exception. My inspiration comes from a book by Brian McClaren called, *More Ready Than You Realize* that shows what evangelism, or as he calls it, *making spiritual friendships* is at its heart all about.**

**I will give you three rules of thumb to guide your thinking. Do you know the origin of the expression, *rule of thumb*? It goes back to the 1600's and in its original use was a unit of measurement. Before Stanley tape measures, carpenters used parts of the body to make measurements. A foot comes from pacing out dimensions. A yard is the distance from the tip of the nose to the tip of outstretched fingers. An inch is the length of the thumb to the first joint. I will give you three rules of thumb, or three standards we shall use to see that our practice of evangelism *measures up*.**

**The first rule has to do with God talk. I think the church hides behind the inaccurate assumption that most people are at worst hostile toward religion and spiritual matters, or at the very least they don't want to talk about it. But more people than you realize**

**who want to talk about God. The truth is, never in history have so many people been looking for answers to their longings.**

**There is a deep need to talk about the meaning and worth of their lives and their mortality. They want to talk about experiences of transcendence they have had, how to deal with conflicting impulses, and how to live the good life. They know there is more to it than what they've been told. They know that life is more than making a living, making money, making love, and accumulating all the goods you can. They know that without answers to their longings they'll be left with nothing except the rule of thumb of the ancient Greeks who said, *"Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die."***

**What you observe about their lives may suggest otherwise, but they want to talk about the things that matter. They won't, however, talk with just anyone. They need to know that the person they talk to is safe. They need to know they won't be criticized, corrected, or preached at, but be treated seriously and sensitively.**

**One of my pastor friends in South Bend made an observation about Jesus. He never invited anyone to church! He invited them into a relationship. He didn't wait for people to come to him. He went to them. On the Sabbath Jesus visited his home congregation. They heard that the local boy had made a name for himself, so they handed him the scroll of Isaiah and asked him to read:**

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.**

**He told them this scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing. These words were the measure of his ministry. To the poor, the captives, the blind and oppressed he brought good news, freedom, sight, and liberty. These people weren't getting this in their synagogues. There was something about him that made**

people want to be near him. They were reluctant to share their needs with religious people. But Jesus was different. They could be themselves. They trusted that he would hold their needs in his heart.

The pastor friend I spoke of started dropping by a popular tavern near his church. He became acquainted with the patrons. They asked him, *“Does your flock know you come here?”* Before long an interesting thing happened. A group gathered at his table. *“We’ve been talking about God. How do you know God exists?”* They began sharing personal problems. *“I’ve never told anything like this to a pastor before,”* one man said. My friend said that he had more meaningful conversations with the folks at the bar than most folks in the pews. In time, some of the watering hole patrons started attending church. Two were baptized.

People cannot be argued or criticized into faith. Slick pitches won’t work. People are looking for ways to talk about God with people who are respectful, caring, genuine, worth talking to, and above all, safe.

The second rule of thumb is near and dear to Brethren. Practicing evangelism requires service. Jesus said he came to serve, and not be served. He told us we are chosen people—not chosen for status or special favor, but chosen to be light, salt, and leaven. We are chosen to serve. When Christians go out of their way to help people, bridges are built for conversation and friendship.

I know a man who became a Christian through a flat tire. He blew a tire late one night on a country road and was having a hard time changing it. A driver pulled up behind him, and helped finish the job. He tried to pay the man but he wouldn’t take the money. He insisted, that the man let him to something to repay him. Finally he said, *“Okay, if you want to do something, how about being my guest in church this Sunday?”* He did, and in the process he met a church-full of people whose purpose was to serve the needs of others out of love for Christ.

God can do a lot with a little. Have you noticed that when you do something unexpected for people, their demeanor changes? A smile. Opening a door. Picking up a twenty that falls from a woman's purse and giving it back to her. Helping pay for someone's meal that is a dollar short. Fixing a flat. Gift-wrapping packages at the mall for Christmas for free. Hammering nails at a Habitat for Humanity project. Little stuff. So many unspectacular ways of sharing the Good News. Christ has envoys in the world whose mission is to bless others. We say more about the Lord we serve by going out of our way to serve others than by telling them to clean up their act or to accept the four spiritual laws.

To be effective at evangelism, we must be safe and we must serve. The third rule of thumb is awareness. There are lots of reasons why people want nothing to do with Christianity. It asks people to do what they don't want to do. It asks them to give up their love affair with self-centeredness, racism, materialism, bigotry, their disdain of those who are different, and society's indulgences. *Who wants to belong to a killjoy religion that takes away all the fun in life?*

There is another reason people want nothing to do with it. Someone said, *"I could become a follower of Jesus, if it weren't for his loathsome bride, the church."* Christians are the reason people are reluctant to become Christians. It's sobering to think that others have observed us and concluded, "If Joe is one of Jesus' followers, I want nothing to do with it." Some people become Christians and no one can stand them anymore because they confirm everything that is bad in people's minds.

I recall a conversation I had with an insurance salesman. He said, "You know, your profession and mine are a lot alike." "How's that?" I asked. He replied, *"We're both trying to sell people something they aren't going to need until they die."* I said he was entitled to his opinion and then changed the subject. The resurrection and eternity with God and all who are dear is our final great hope. This hope means something right now. If it has nothing to do with life today or improving the life and lot of people in need, why bother?

**Why would God, prepare a wondrous eternity for us, and not also provide us with everything we need to live abundantly and joyfully here and now? We have been given the best possible way to live. It's not about narrow-minded beliefs or believing a set of doctrines. Introducing people to Jesus calls for something better than strategies, crusades, campaigns, canned answers that put the great, awesome, mysterious God in a little box.**

**We will be effective evangelists, spiritual friends, or whatever we want to call ourselves, and the church will grow, not by hypnosis, but provided we are safe people, serving people, and aware people who love others into the never-ending adventure with Jesus.**